

## HERSTORY OF EAST TIMOR: VIEWING *BEATRIZ'S WAR*

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### ABSTRACT

*Beatriz's War* is an East Timor film which focuses on the life of an East Timorese girl called Beatriz. It pictures the horrors of the Indonesian occupation and how the Timorese coped with and resisted it, especially the women in East Timor. War and liberation struggle often change the traditional roles that women play in their societies. The story begins with the marriage of Beatriz and Tomas during the time of the Indonesian attack. Beatriz, Tomas, and Tomas's sister, Teresa escape to the mountains, as East Timorese had done in history. By making a detailed analysis of the oppression and struggle that Beatriz has gone through the paper attempts to study 'herstory' of resistance by women in East Timor.

**KEYWORDS:** *Beatriz's War*, East Timorese girl called Beatriz

**Received:** Sep 26, 2021; **Accepted:** Oct 16, 2021; **Published:** Nov 01, 2021; **Paper Id.:** IJELDEC202120

### INTRODUCTION

East Timor is a Southeast Asian country that was colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Then it was known as Portuguese Timor. Portuguese left East Timor in 1974, when the Portuguese colonial empire broke up. Fretilin, a revolutionary left-wing party declared East Timor independent on 28th November 1975. But on December 7th of that year, Indonesia invaded East Timor with the implicit approval of western governments. Indonesia occupied East Timor till August 1999, when East Timor was liberated with the aid of the United Nations. In 2002, after the transitional period under UN administration, East Timor gained formal independence.

*Beatriz's War* which won the Golden Peacock Award in the International Film Festival India, 2013 is the first East Timor film to be made in their language Tatum. This film is an adaptation of a French story *Bertrande de Rols*. But it covers the period of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor from 1975 to 1999, by focusing on the life of an East Timorese girl called Beatriz. The episode of the Indonesian occupation is discussed through the life struggles of Beatriz. It focuses on the horrors of those times and how the Timorese coped with and resisted the occupation, especially women in East Timor. The movie becomes important in the context that the role played by Timorese women in the resistance movement is not given due attention internationally. Most actors and crew of the film had a right-hand experience of the Indonesian occupation and were part of various resistance movements.

War and liberation struggle often change the traditional roles that women play in their societies. Incidences that occur in the life of Beatriz are true stories of East Timor women during the occupation. Multiple levels of physical and emotional oppression on Timorese women are incorporated into Beatriz's life. The story begins with the marriage of Beatriz and Tomas during the time of the Indonesian attack. Beatriz, Tomas, and Tomas's sister, Teresa escape to the mountains, as East Timorese had done in history. There started the struggles of Beatriz.

Although the traditional social structure of East Timor is patriarchal, women enjoyed more freedom. "They were not excluded from the traditional power structure and could even fulfil a leadership role" (*Independent Women*

34). Self-asserted and freer outlook of East Timor women, which differentiates them from women of Java and Malay, was noted by 19th-century British explorer Alfred Russel Wallace. This freedom was eroded, especially in urban centers, when catholic missionaries succeeded in spreading their social values among a large part of the population. Beatriz is a strong-willed powerful woman opposite in nature to her husband who is a coward. Thus, Beatriz is bestowed with the characteristic qualities of a typical Timorese woman.

The period of Indonesian occupation can be divided into war years (1975-1979) when a large part of the population lived as refugees in the hills and the years after 1979 when first a village-based and then an urban-centered resistance developed. Women and children became an invaluable support network for the armed resistance (*Independent Women* 2005). Beatriz and her family were captured in 1979 and resettled in the village of Kraras. There are many indications in the movie which show that Beatriz is supporting Tomas' father who is leading a Guerrilla war against Indonesian soldiers.

In the village of Kraras pregnant Beatriz is raped by Indonesian Captain in front of her husband. Her faith in Tomas and his inability to save her are depicted clearly. From the day of the invasion, sexual violence and rape became hallmarks of Indonesian occupation. According to Bishop Dom Martinho, former Bishop of Dili: "one of their (the Indonesian soldiers) favourite customs was to rape wives in front of their husbands, right there, sometimes with the children there too" (*Independent Women* 47). Women victims of rape were often (but not always) ostracized by their families and communities. There are real testimonies of women who were brutally raped by Indonesian soldiers during their occupation. UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Radhika Coomaraswamy, explains this phenomenon as follows:

Perhaps more than the honour of the victim, it is the perceived honour of the enemy that is targeted in the perpetration of sexual violence against women; it is seen and experienced as a means of humiliating the opposition. Sexual violence against women is meant to demonstrate victory over the men of the other group who had failed to protect their women. It is a message of castration and emasculation of the enemy group. It is a battle among men fought over the bodies of women (*Independent Women* 48)

The film records the real incident of the massacre in the village of Kraras, where Indonesian military killed the entire male population. Beatriz who escaped to the hilltop witnessed the massacre. The incident changed the role of women in society entirely. Mana Bisoi, a fighter and a member of Kraras explains that "we wanted to show that women, too, had a strong sense of duty" (*Independent Women* 51). This determination is evident in the talks and decisions of Beatriz who became the leader of the group in the absence of the male members. Women from Kraras are taken to a coastal village where they are used as sex slaves of the Indonesian military. These women who organize under the leadership of Beatriz decide to bring up their children (by Indonesian soldiers) as Timorese. Here we can see how women use their reproductive biopower to resist the invasion which destroyed their culture. Children by Indonesian soldiers were brought up as Timorese, teaching them traditional skills and style.

Another common practice of the occupying forces was to take East Timorese women as their second wives through forced marriages during their stay in Timor. In Beatriz's War, Teresa the sister-in-law of Beatriz is forced by an Indonesian soldier, Captain Sumitro to marry him. Beatriz also compelled Teresa to marry the captain to check his abduction and rape of other female members of the society by providing him a family life. Marriage, a powerful institution of patriarchy to exploit women is used successfully to an extent by Timorese women to resist the Indonesian insult on

Timorese female body. In the film, it is shown that Captain who loves his daughter by Teresa lives there as a family man till the end of the occupation. But the tragedy of Teresa who sacrificed her body and honor for protecting other women in the group turns out to be drastic, as her daughter is taken away by the captain when he leaves East Timor.

The movie also discusses the marginalized existence of Timorese women within the community. Although women got chances to participate in debates when they were living as refugees in mountains, always men took decisions. In *Beatriz's War*, Beatriz is more intellectually capable but she lives as a subordinate to Tomas in the Patriarchal family institution. The conservative views on women during Portuguese times have changed a little. The impact of Roman Catholicism on women's life is always explicit in *Beatriz's War*, in the role played by local priests. Local catholic priest plays a mediating role. It has been common, for their advice in marital disputes to be more concerned with reuniting the couple without considering any mistreat of the wife by the husband. Beatriz visits a local priest after she was raped, there the local priest consoles and he succeeds in pacifying her hatred for Tomas, who failed to protect her from the captain. But in a soliloquy, Beatriz makes it clear that she can never forgive Tomas, for this. Christian ideologies and tribal patriarchal rules which operate through myths, customs, and rituals, are the forces that, operate as external and internal forces that check Beatriz's emotions and decisions.

In the history of East Timor, it is recorded that it is not only Indonesian soldiers who used East Timor as sex slaves. Maria Madalena, a victim remembers the time of the Indonesian invasion. She says, "Women were treated as equals in theory, but practice lagged" (*Independent Women* 71). In practice, the men used women as "comforts for the men".

Tomas who disappears during the Kraras massacre returns after 16 years in 1999, following East Timor's independence. Tomas who returned is wiser, gregarious, and loving. He appears to have learned more from life and war but Beatriz later discovers that the man returned is not Tomas but his imposter. The lies of this imposter violated Beatriz's idealized love for Tomas. He stands as a symbol for violation of East Timorese women's sexuality after independence. As one East Timorese woman explained, "even these days, during this time of independence, I am still seeing things which are not right. East Timorese women are still living in violence. It is not Indonesians, but East Timorese men, who are being violent" (*Independent Women* 71)

Thus, in the character of Beatriz, the film *Beatriz's War* succeeds in narrating the struggles and resistance of East Timorese women against male violence and invasion. It succeeds in bringing together the complexity of multiple levels of oppression and violation on East Timorese women's bodies and sexuality. It proves that many women, although unarmed, were braver than men carrying weapons. Thus, it can be considered as an engaged film narration of "Herstory" of East Timor.

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